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SUBJECT: CHRISTIANITY: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS "MORE OPEN" TO  
IT; PRC RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS OFFICIALS FEAR ITS RAPID GROWTH

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor  
Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Most Peking University students had an "objective" attitude toward Christianity, suggesting that religious tolerance had "increased" in China, according to a recent survey conducted by a professor at the university. The professor told PolOff his survey found that four percent of Peking University students were Christian, 20 percent wanted to know more about Christianity and 54 percent had spoken with Christian missionaries about religion. PRC religious affairs officials were "frightened" by the rapid growth of Christianity and its prospects for further expansion, according to the professor, who estimated there were approximately 100 million Chinese Christians. While speculating that freedom to practice Christianity would continue to "gradually increase" in many areas of China, the professor said he nevertheless hoped PRC authorities would "take their time" in formulating new policies on religion, given that concerns over Christianity's swift spread might prompt PRC officials to try to contain its growth. End Summary.

STUDENTS "OBJECTIVE," WANT TO KNOW MORE RE CHRISTIANITY  
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¶2. (C) In a March 16 meeting with PolOff, Peking University Religious Studies Professor Sun Shangyang (protect) said he had recently conducted a survey showing that the university's students had an "objective" attitude toward Christianity "based on true facts, not on false ideology or historical problems." Sun and a team of nine graduate students had compiled 951 responses to 1,000 questionnaires distributed among the university's 30,000 students. Sun was studying how attitudes toward Christianity had changed in recent decades. Sun, who received his Ph.D. at Peking University in 1991 and has taught there since 1996, planned to present his survey results at a conference at Purdue University's Center on Religion and Chinese Society in May.

¶3. (C) According to Sun's survey, 4.27 percent of the university's students identified themselves as Christians. The majority of these attended unofficial "house churches," although some worshipped with official Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) congregations, and some attended both house churches and TSPM churches. Twenty percent of students wanted to know more about Christianity but had been "too busy" with other commitments to do so. Among students who wanted to know more, many were attracted to Western institutions and saw Christianity as a positive component of Western culture. Fifty-four percent of students had spoken with Christian missionaries about religion. (Note: The figure about missionaries is striking, given that it is illegal in China to proselytize beyond the grounds of an official TSPM church.) One percent of students, "mostly Muslims, Buddhists and Taoists," had expressed "strong antipathy" toward Christianity. Anti-Christian sentiment expressed by this small segment of the student population supported the need for interfaith dialogue and understanding,

Sun asserted. His study did not reveal significant numbers of students who disliked Christianity due to Communist conceptions of religion or propaganda concerning the reported "misdeeds" of Christian religionists in China, Sun noted.

CHRISTIANITY GROWING RAPIDLY, PRC OFFICIALS "FRIGHTENED"

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14. (C) Christianity was "growing rapidly in China," Professor Sun stated, estimating there to be around 100 million Chinese Christians, based on partial studies in rural and urban areas, even though he acknowledged that no one in China had conducted a "definitive nationwide survey" on this subject. (Note: Sun's estimate of 100 million Chinese Christians tracks with that of scholar Yu Jianrong, head of the Chinese Academy of Social Science's Rural Development Research Center, who recently estimated there were 80 to 100 million Christians in China.) According to Sun's survey, the percentage of Christians at Peking University was lower than the national average because many students had a "humanist outlook" and were not religious. The students' curiosity and general openness toward learning about Christianity nevertheless suggested that religious tolerance had increased in China, Sun averred. (Note: Sun drew a contrast with the "objective" attitude of today's students with those from those nearly 90 years ago, when Peking University students had been "unanimously opposed" to a nationwide gathering of Christians at Tsinghua University in 1922.)

15. (C) The large number of Christians in China and the its rapid growth "frightens" PRC officials charged with "managing" religion, because its spread might indicate these

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officials had failed "to manage religion properly," Sun stated. Sun had told State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) officials they did not need to worry that Christianity would continue its rapid growth forever, pointing to Taiwan and Hong Kong, where Christians make up less than 10 percent of the overall population despite greater religious freedom. SARA officials reportedly rejected Sun's argument, stating that Mainland China was "a special case" because the Cultural Revolution had stripped away traditional religious and belief systems, opening "unusually fertile ground" for the growth of Christianity. Under these circumstances, SARA officials had told Sun, the percentage of Christians on the Mainland might rise well beyond that seen in other areas.

CHINA SHOULD "TAKE TIME" TO FORMULATE NEW RELIGION POLICY

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16. (C) Sun expected that freedom to practice Christianity would continue to increase gradually in many areas of China during the coming decade. China should allow a "free market" for religion, Sun asserted, by not prescribing religious choices (i.e., the five "main" religions recognized by the PRC), and instead allowing "consumers" of religion to choose.

Sun said, however, that China had to protect its citizens from "harm done by religious cults," which justified "some limits" on religious practice.

17. (C) Sun hoped the PRC Government would "take its time" before formulating new laws or policies on religion. With Christianity expanding rapidly in China, the government might try to dampen its growth if Chinese officials were to focus "too much attention" on this trend now. Sun said a middle-school friend who was a government official had recently submitted a report on the growth of Christianity in rural areas to higher-level officials, but after several months had received no response. The lack of a response was good, Sun averred, because government action arising out of the report "might not have been helpful." For now, it was best for Christianity to continue to grow while the government turned its attention to "more urgent matters, including the economic crisis." Sun concluded by noting that

he was free to publish "anything he wants" in his field, even  
on topics that did not square with Party orthodoxy.  
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